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ABSTRACT

This report examines students', teachers', and parents' reactions to standardized testing and whether the move to raise academic standards has improved the quality of college students and new employees. It is based on telephone interviews conducted in late 2000 with a national and random sample of public-school teachers, parents of public-school students, public-school students in either middle or high school, employers, and college professors. The findings show that students, parents, and teachers were beginning to accept the standards movement. Those surveyed reported less social promotion and believed that private schools were losing their advantage. All groups voiced strong support for local efforts to raise standards and for using high-stakes standardized tests as part of the effort. However, all groups strongly opposed basing promotion or graduation solely on the results of testing. Students themselves voiced little resentment or anxiety over testing and promotion, with most of them saying that the tests seem fair. Parents gave their districts good marks on standards, and increasing numbers knew more about how their own schools rated within the district. Teachers reported that standardized tests motivate students and can help diagnose problems, but many of them claim that districts were putting too much emphasis on tests. Employers and professors were far more disapproving than parents or teachers on how well young people are prepared for college and work. (RJM)

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Public Agenda: Reality Check 2001.

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February 21, 2001

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SPECIAL REPORT

PUBLIC AGENDA

Reality Check 2001

Made possible by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, with additional support from the GE Fund.

A progress report on raising standards shows less social promotion, more summer school, and few signs of a backlash.

For the past four years, Public Agenda has asked public school students, parents, and teachers, along with employers and college professors, to assess their own communities' progress in raising the bar for public schools. Although 49 states have set academic standards in at least some subjects, and all test how well their students are learning, earlier *Reality Check* surveys suggested that many of these reforms had yet to reach the nation's classrooms.

A Movement Beginning To Take Hold

This year's polling paints a different picture. Students, parents, and teachers all report a set of incremental changes in their experiences and expectations, suggesting that the "standards movement" has begun to take hold. And although the increase in the use of high-stakes standardized tests that has accompanied the movement has been controversial, *Reality Check* picks up few signs of a public backlash. Neither parents nor teachers, nor even students themselves, voice significant dissatisfaction or alarm about expectations or policies in their

About This Report

Reality Check, a joint project of Public Agenda and *Education Week*, is the annual report on the progress of the academic-standards movement and the impact of reform efforts on schools and the work world as seen from the perspectives of education's key stakeholders. The Pew Charitable Trusts and the GE Fund provide support for the project.

The three previous editions of *Reality Check* appeared in *Education Week* on Feb. 16, 2000, Jan. 11, 1999 (*Quality Counts 1999*), and Jan. 8, 1998 (*Quality Counts 1998*.)

Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in New York City, designed the surveys on which this report is based and provided this summary of the findings.

The report was prepared by Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett, Tony Foleno, Patrick Foley, and Steve Farkas.

More findings from the Reality Check surveys are available online at www.edweek.org and www.publicagenda.org.

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own schools. Large majorities of all groups express strong support for their own districts' efforts to raise standards and for using standardized tests as an important—though not the sole—way to enforce standards.

Although *Reality Check* does not cover every strategy districts are using to raise standards, the surveys do gauge progress in areas that standards advocates themselves often identify as beneficial and crucial. This year's edition also devotes a battery of questions to the use of computers in schools. Here again, reports from the field suggest that technology, like standards, is slowly but surely recasting the way American students learn.

FINDING 1:

Students, parents, and teachers report changes in academic, promotion, and testing policies, suggesting that the standards movement has begun to take hold in classrooms nationwide.

Like many important social goals, the drive to raise academic standards in public schools is undoubtedly easier said than done. Revising long-standing policies in thousands of districts and reshaping the habits and expectations of students, parents, and teachers nationwide, is, as standards advocates fairly point out, a difficult and complex task that can scarcely be accomplished in a year or two.

In 1998, 1999, and 2000, *Reality Check* showed just what many expected: teachers and parents supported high standards, though few reported significant changes in their own schools. But results for 2001, based on observations from randomly drawn cross-sections of middle and high school students, parents with children currently in public schools, and classroom teachers, have begun to reveal some statistically significant patterns of change. *Reality Check* findings among teachers especially confirm and amplify many of the results from *Education Week*'s *Quality Counts 2001*, published last month. *(See Education Week, Jan. 11, 2001.)*

Less Social Promotion

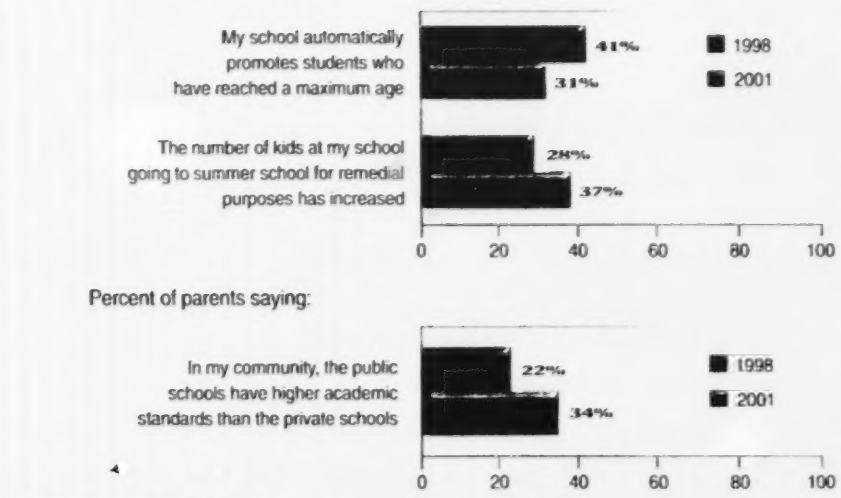
For example, the number of teachers who say that their own schools practice social promotion, defined here as promoting students based on age rather than mastery of required skills, has declined steadily over the last four years. In 1998, fully 41 percent of teachers reported that their schools promoted youngsters based on age. In 2001, that number has dropped to 31 percent.

The number of teachers who say that their own schools practice social promotion has declined steadily.

Nearly four in 10 teachers (37 percent) report that more students are attending summer school, up from 28 percent four years ago. More than half of teachers (53 percent) say students are now more likely to take summer school seriously, an increase of 10 percentage points from 1998. Student responses confirm teachers' judgments: 55 percent of students say that they are expected to learn a lot in summer school, compared with 42 percent who say that they are not expected to learn much.

Increasing numbers of parents report that their children are required to take tests at various points in their schooling to ensure that they are acquiring necessary skills, a practice many standards advocates favor. Over half of grade school parents (55 percent) report that their children must pass a basic-skills test before being promoted to middle or junior high school, up from 48 percent last year. Almost six

TEACHERS AND PARENTS SEE CHANGE



SOURCE: Public Agenda, Reality Check 2001.

in 10 middle school parents (59 percent) also say that this is true for their children to be promoted to high school.

Private Schools Losing Their Advantage on Standards

Although it is impossible to say with certainty whether the two developments are connected, *Reality Check* also picks up an intriguing shift in parents' perceptions of academic standards in public schools. Four years ago, just one parent out of five (22 percent) said that local public schools had higher standards than local private schools, but in 2001 this number has jumped to 34 percent. Meanwhile, the number giving private schools the edge on standards has dropped from 42 percent to 35 percent.

Equally striking is a sizable jump in employers' judgment on how well local schools enforce standards as they now stand. Employers still voice considerable doubts about students' basic skills, but almost two-thirds (64 percent) acknowledge that students don't graduate from local schools unless they have learned what was expected of them, up from 51 percent in 1999.

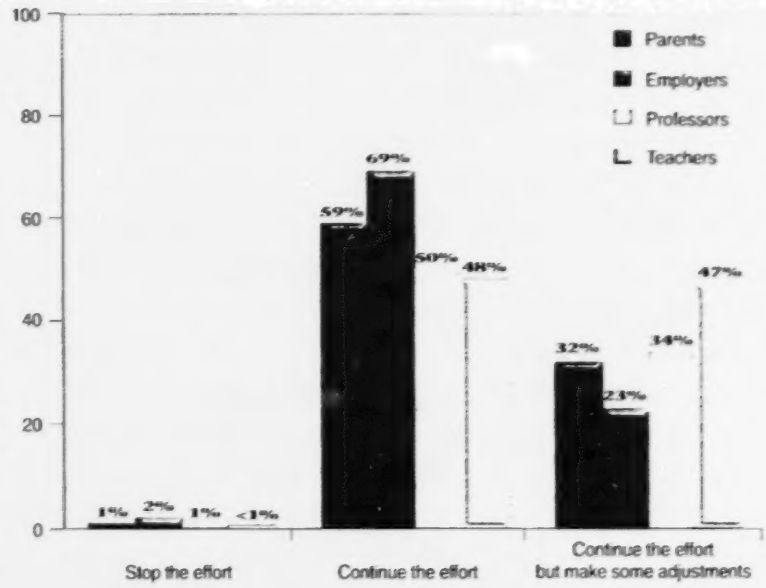
Mutually Reinforcing Trends

These trends—picked up over the last four years—are both statistically significant and mutually reinforcing. Students, parents, teachers, and employers appear to be observing a similar evolution in standards and promotion policies.

One question showed little change. In a finding that will hearten some, but discourage others, *Reality Check* shows no increase in what is perhaps the most controversial element of many standards initiatives—introduction of a high school exit exam. The number of high school students who say that they must pass an exit exam to receive a diploma has hovered at the halfway mark for the past three years.

VERY LITTLE BACKLASH

What should your school district do when it comes to the effort towards higher standards?

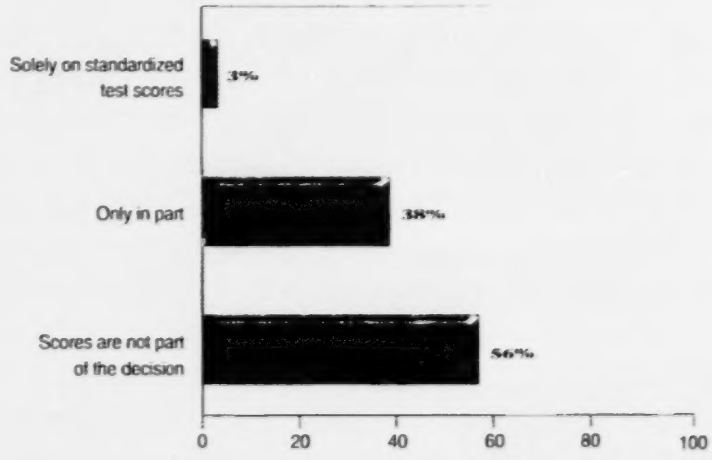


Base: Those who say their school district is making an effort to raise standards.

SOURCE: Public Agenda, Reality Check 2001

FEW DISTRICTS USE TEST SCORES TO DECIDE PROMOTION

Percent of teachers saying at their school students are promoted:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, Reality Check 2001.

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FINDING 2:

All groups voice strong support for local efforts to raise standards and for using high-stakes standardized tests as part of the effort. However, all groups strongly oppose basing promotion or graduation solely on the results of testing—a policy that teachers say is still quite rare.

Since its inception, the drive to raise standards in public schools has drawn support across the political spectrum, and surveys have repeatedly shown that large majorities of both parents and the general public strongly back the effort. But while the goal of higher standards is almost universally lauded, the use of high-stakes standardized tests to measure student, teacher, and/or district performance is far more controversial. Press reports have suggested that there is a growing backlash against the standards movement and against standardized testing in particular.

No Wish To Turn Back

If backlash is defined as a desire to return to policies of the past, then *Reality Check* suggests that the phenomenon is virtually nonexistent. Among those who know their districts are raising standards, just 1 percent of parents, less than 1 percent of teachers, 2 percent of employers, and 1 percent of professors say local schools should discontinue their current efforts. At least seven in 10 in each of these groups say local schools are being "careful and reasonable in putting standards in place," and large numbers of parents (59 percent), employers (69 percent), and professors (50 percent) want the standards initiative to proceed as planned.

Parents seem to tune in to their own children's progress, but perhaps understandably lack knowledge of less relevant issues.

About half of teachers (48 percent) want their districts to continue as planned, but just as many (47 percent) say that they would prefer some adjustments. As we cover in Finding 5, and as *Education Week* has shown in *Quality Counts 2001*, teachers have specific qualms about standardized testing. Taken as a whole, however, *Reality Check* shows a broad and impressive endorsement of the direction standards reformers have chosen.

Standardized Tests: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Views on testing are complex, and most parents and teachers clearly back the use of high-stakes standardized tests to motivate students and identify those who are struggling. Both groups find value in a final "check all systems" exam before a student is awarded a final high school diploma. But large majorities also believe in factoring in the human component. Good judgments are made, both parents and teachers seem to say, when standardized accountability measures are used in conjunction with teachers' professional experience and when they leave room for individual judgment.

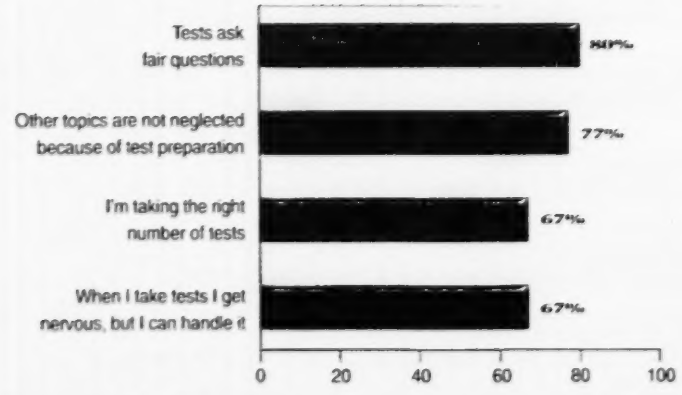
Large majorities of parents (83 percent), teachers (72 percent), employers (77 percent), and professors (78 percent) say students study harder if they know they must pass a test to get promoted or graduate. Most parents (81 percent) and teachers (62 percent) agree that testing younger students is a good way to identify those who need special help. Most parents (60 percent) and teachers (57 percent) also say children are taking about the right number of tests.

About half of teachers (50 percent) and parents (46 percent) think that questions on standardized tests are fair, although large numbers (40 percent of parents and 19 percent of teachers) admit that they do not know whether the questions are fair or not.

Interestingly, the group that has almost certainly spent the most time poring over standardized-test questions,

STUDENTS UNRUFFLED BY STANDARDIZED TESTS

Percent of students saying:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, Reality Check 2001

students themselves, is overwhelmingly convinced that the questions are fair—80 percent of students say so.

Far from rejecting the idea of a high school exit exam, very few parents or teachers say students should get a diploma *without* one. Most parents (57 percent) and teachers (56 percent) say such tests should focus on basic skills, but more than a quarter (27 percent of parents and 26 percent of teachers) say they should be even tougher. Relatively few (just 12 percent of parents and 15 percent of teachers) say there should be no exam at all.

Leaving Room for Individual Judgments

But very large majorities—75 percent of parents and 90 percent of teachers—also say that it is "wrong to use the results of just one test to decide whether a student gets promoted or graduates." Bolstering this finding, more than eight in 10 parents (83 percent) and teachers (84 percent) say schools should use standardized scores along with teacher evaluations to decide whether students are ready to move on.

Ironically, despite the well-publicized controversy over basing promotion solely on tests scores, the practice still seems to be relatively rare. Just 3 percent of teachers say this is the policy in their districts. In fact, more than half (56 percent) say that test scores do not enter into the decision at all, while 38 percent say tests are used along with other factors.

FINDING 3:

Students voice very little resentment or anxiety over testing and promotion in their schools, and most say the tests they take seem fair.

More than eight in 10 (81 percent) students say all or most of their teachers expect them to do their best, and even more (88 percent) say that their schools place a lot of emphasis on academics and getting high grades. Most also seem comfortable with these expectations: 74 percent say that their schools' expectations are about right; only 15 percent say they're too high.

But despite these good reviews, large numbers of students also report that some of their peers still slip through the cracks. Forty-two percent say that "some kids graduate from my school even though they haven't learned what they are supposed to."

Carrots and Sticks

Policies that tie standards to promotion and graduation do seem to motivate most students. About two out of three students say that fear of being left back (67 percent) or going to summer school (63 percent) would motivate them "a lot" to work hard in school. And most high school students who must take an exit exam to graduate say that this makes them work harder in school (63 percent). But positive incentives seem important as well: More than eight in 10 high school students say that getting into a good college (84 percent) or earning a college scholarship (82 percent) also motivates them a lot.

Little High Anxiety

Students are hardly overwhelmed, embittered, or dismissive about standardized tests. Virtually all (91 percent) say they take these tests seriously. Few seem resentful: Just 27 percent think they have to take too many standardized tests, and most (67 percent) think that the number is about right. Based on their experience, most (80 percent) say the test questions are fair. Only 19 percent think the questions are unfair and too difficult. As far as the type of tests, 51 percent say they are strictly multiple-choice, while 47 percent have taken standardized tests that require them to write and explain their answers.

Anecdotes often focus on stories of young people worried sick over important standardized tests. But very few students (5 percent) say that they get so nervous before standardized tests that they can't take them. Two-thirds (67 percent) say "I get nervous but I can handle it," and another 28 percent say they don't get nervous at all. Students in focus groups knew of others who experienced severe anxiety, but said they themselves manage the stress pretty well.

"I used to get really nervous, because I thought it would affect my outlook for college," said one youngster from the Los Angeles area. "But now, as long as I try not to think that it's going to affect me too much, I do pretty well."

FINDING 4:

Parents give their districts good marks on standards, and increasing numbers know more about how their own schools rate within the district. But large numbers of parents are still poorly informed about other important criteria.

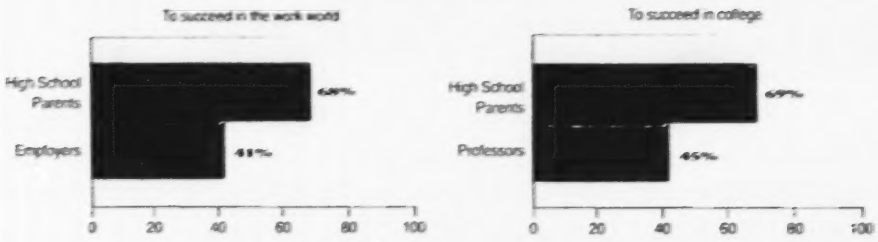
As in past years, parents continue to express satisfaction about their children's academic experience. Majorities say their local public schools are doing an excellent or good job (74 percent), that their children's teachers expect students to work hard and to do their best (81 percent), and that the academic expectations at their own children's schools are about right (66 percent). In an era of heightened expectations, most also say extra help is readily available to students who are falling behind (78 percent).

Compared to What

But these good reviews occur against a backdrop of relatively spotty information. Half of parents (50 percent) say they know a lot about how their children compare academically with other children in the same grade, but few can say the same about comparisons with children in the same state (26 percent) or across the nation (17 percent), much

DO HIGH SCHOOL GRADS HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?

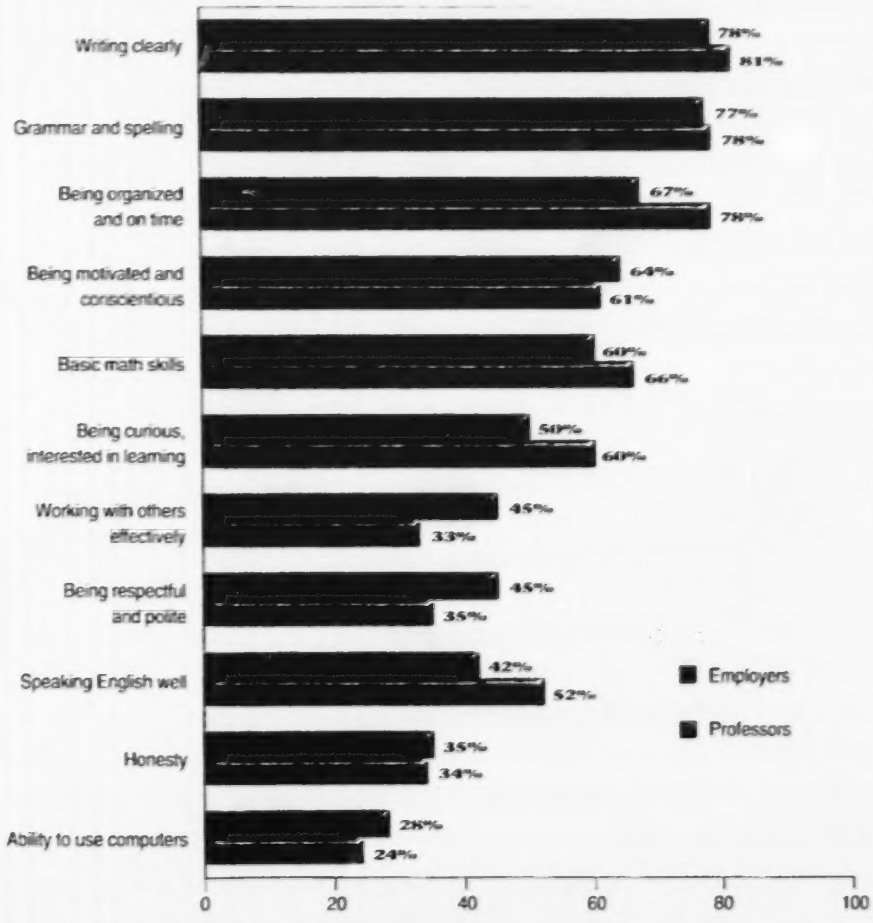
Percent saying their children "will have the skills to succeed" in each of the following:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, Reality Check 2001

EMPLOYERS AND PROFESSORS REMAIN DISSATISFIED WITH BASIC SKILLS

Percent giving recent high school graduates "poor" or "fair" ratings on:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, Reality Check 2001

less internationally (6 percent). Forty-one percent of parents know very little or nothing about academic goals for their children's grade levels. And fully 31 percent don't know if the local schools are making an effort to put higher standards into place or not. Many seem to tune in to their own children's progress, but perhaps understandably lack knowledge or even interest as the issues become less personally relevant.

In one notable bright spot, almost half of parents (47 percent) say they know a lot about how their children's schools rank academically compared with other schools in the district—an impressive increase from the 35 percent who said this in 1998.

FINDING 5:

Teachers say standardized tests can motivate students and diagnose problems, and most say that "real learning" is not suffering in their own classrooms. But large majorities also say that districts are putting too much emphasis on tests, and that schools themselves are not chiefly to blame when students do poorly.

Catching Problems Early

Most teachers recognize the use of tests as a motivational tool: 72 percent agree that "students pay more attention and study harder if they must pass a test to get promoted or graduate." Sixty-six percent of teachers agree that "standardized-test scores are a good way to spot struggling students who need tutoring or summer school." This sentiment carries through even when the test-takers are still in elementary school: 62 percent think this approach is good because struggling students can be identified and helped; just 36 percent say it's wrong because it puts too much pressure on children.

"Test scores have gone up, proving that they are learning more," said a 6th grade science teacher in central New

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Jersey. "If they're in the 8th grade taking their first standardized test, you've lost four years to see what they need to know, to help them to learn. Now, you're catching it early."

A Good Thing That Could Get Out of Hand

Public Agenda's research suggests that most teachers have thought long and hard about the benefits and drawbacks of standardized testing—and they undoubtedly see some benefits to it. And at the moment, just 20 percent say they themselves focus so much on test preparation that real learning is neglected—more than three-quarters (79 percent) say this is not currently the case in their own classrooms.

But teachers are also clearly worried. Large majorities fear that "teachers will end up teaching to the tests instead of making sure real learning takes place" (83 percent), and that "schools today place far too much emphasis on standardized tests" (82 percent). Almost half—47 percent—fear that schools will be overwhelmed because too many students will fail.

Can You Make Students Learn?

What's more, most teachers don't really think that schools are necessarily to blame when students test poorly. If teachers heard, for example, that large numbers of students in their districts did poorly, almost four in ten (38 percent) would blame the design of the test, and another 23 percent would think that these students simply lacked the ability to do well. Only 27 percent would say that students did poorly because schools failed to adequately prepare them.

Other Public Agenda research has shown that teachers routinely say that many students arrive in their classrooms with terrible deficits—particularly those from unstable, unsupportive, or impoverished homes. Eighty-one percent of teachers say, as just one example, that parents who refuse to hold their children accountable for their behavior or academic performance present a serious problem at their schools.

FINDING 6:

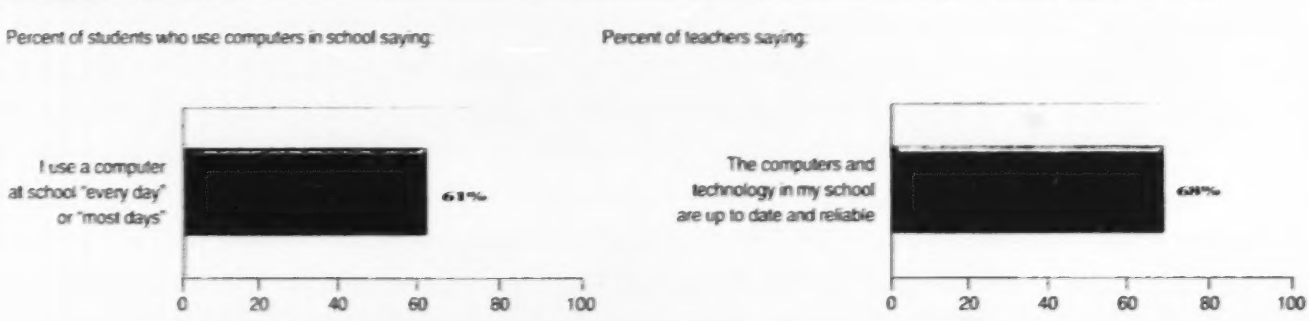
Employers and professors are far more disapproving than parents or teachers of how well young people are prepared for college and work, and very large majorities continue to voice significant dissatisfaction about students' basic skills.

Since it began, *Reality Check* has asked local employers and professors for their views on how well incoming students are prepared, and this year, as before, these two groups remain broadly dissatisfied. Employers' appraisals have improved modestly over the years, but overall, *Reality Check* continues to show jarring discrepancies between the judgments employers and professors make about student skills and the far more enthusiastic assessments offered by teachers, parents, and students themselves.

Are They Good to Go?

While both high school teachers and parents voice broad confidence that graduating students have the skills needed to succeed on the job, just 41 percent of employers agree, although this number has climbed from 27 percent in 1998. And while majorities of both high school teachers and parents expect graduating youngsters to flourish in college, less than half of professors (45 percent) say incoming students are adequately prepared. Similarly, while most teachers, parents, and high school students say a high school diploma means a youngster has mastered at least basic skills, just 40 percent of employers and a bare 26 percent of professors say a high school diploma is a guarantee.

TECHNOLOGY TAKING HOLD



SOURCE: Public Agenda, Reality Check 2001

Poor Grammar and Not Particularly Conscientious

Asked to rate student skills in specific areas, the employers and professors echo their judgment that today's youngsters too often lack what many see as the core elements of any sound education. For the fourth year in a row, three out of four employers and professors say the youngsters they see have just fair or poor skills in grammar and spelling and in their ability to write clearly. Ratings are just marginally better for basic math.

Employers and professors continue to be much more critical of students' skills than teachers, parents, and students themselves.

Nor do the youngsters do much better on criteria such as being "motivated and conscientious" or "organized and on time." The most consistent bright spot, as we discuss in the next section, is the impressively high ratings both employers and professors give students for their know-how using computers.

FINDING 7:

More students report using computers at school on a regular basis, and are using them for serious learning. Large majorities of teachers say they get the technological support and equipment they need, and feel comfortable using computers in the classroom.

Almost everyone agrees that students need sound computer skills in today's society. Seventy-nine percent of employers, and an overwhelming 94 percent of professors, think it's important for job applicants and new students to have computer skills. Reassuringly, both groups continue to rate students highly on their computer knowledge (68 percent of employers and 71 percent of professors).

The 1990s saw a huge increase in the number of schools wired for the Internet, and *Reality Check* shows a steady increase in computer access and use among public school students. Virtually all students say they have used a computer in school this year (92 percent), and the frequency of those who use computers every day or most days is climbing—from four in 10 (40 percent) in 1998 to six in 10 (61 percent) today.

Not only is the use of technology increasing, but the way students use computers seems more sophisticated. This year, 63 percent report that they use computers in school mostly to help them learn, rather than for typing or playing games, an increase of 21 percentage points from 1998. Internet use, in particular, is on the upswing. This year, 38 percent of students say they use the Internet to do schoolwork at least once a week, compared with 27 percent last year. And students are twice as likely as they were four years ago to say they can use the Internet whenever they want in school (from 19 percent to 41 percent).

A high school student in a suburban Maryland focus group described a typical day: "I used [a computer] three times today. I had to type a paper for first period. And second period, I have a computer class. I had to do a project. And seventh period I had to go to biology.com to answer questions."

Computers Not Overrated

Teachers are also resoundingly positive about their experience with technology in the classroom. Of those who use computers as a teaching tool (50 percent of teachers do so regularly and 28 percent sometimes), 74 percent say computers really help children learn, compared with 25 percent who say their usefulness is exaggerated. Large majorities give their schools good grades on making sure teachers have professional development to help them use computers effectively (88 percent), and almost seven in 10 (69 percent) give themselves high marks on their own ability to use computers to help students learn. Few seem to have complaints about the quality of the computers in their schools. Thirty-two percent describe their computers as outdated, but a large majority of teachers (68 percent) describe their schools' computers as "up to date and reliable."

Methodology

Telephone interviews were conducted in November and December 2000 with national random samples of 601 K-12 public school teachers; 602 parents with children currently attending public school in grades K-12; 600 public school students in middle or high school; 251 employers who make hiring decisions for employees recently out of high school or college; and 254 college professors at two- and four-year colleges who taught freshmen or sophomores in the last two years.

The margin of error for teachers, parents, and students is plus or minus 4 percentage points; for employers and college professors, plus or minus 6 percentage points. ■

For more information on this or other Public Agenda research, visit Public Agenda Online at www.publicagenda.org. In-depth information, including survey findings, news digests, and trend data, is available on education and nearly two dozen other public-policy issues.

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